DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 089 CS 509 858

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TITLE Possible Criteria for Evaluating Shakycam.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Processes; *Evaluation Criteria; *Film Study; Higher Education; *Mass Media; *Production Techniques
IDENTIFIERS Aesthetic Communication; Camera Angles; *Video Production; Visual Communication

ABSTRACT

The pressure to produce products assures thoughtless imitation and replication in video production. As J. Lynch (1984) observed of the early music video industry, "they borrow the techniques of Dada, Surrealism, and abstract film, and as K. Dieckmann (1985) concurs, the "commercialized industry takes up avant-garde practices to sell products." Those instructors who are obliged to discuss, demonstrate, and evaluate media production practices are burdened with the need and responsibility to define and even quantify such practices. How does an instructor critique the use of such imaging variables as black and white, and Steadicam versus "shakycam?" The shakycam image, also referred to as "the film school look," appears erratic and unplanned. Distinguishing good and appropriate shakycam from bad or inappropriate shakycam requires discerning some form of positive and constructive communication aesthetic within that which appears to be random or thoughtlessly anarchic. "The film school look" might result from a neophyte camera user's lack of bodily motor control and skill in obtaining a desired image composition. An experienced camera user will inevitably develop a sense of composition in accordance with established guidelines. What "authentic" shakycam might exhibit is a camera movement that mimics eye movement. From a production aesthetics standpoint, it is possible to distinguish between good and bad shakycam and other reflexive techniques. A consideration of the fundamental characteristics of perceptual and cognitive processes can provide support for understanding how these techniques function. (NKA)

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POSSIBLE CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING SHAKYCAM

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ED 420 089

Most film and television productions tend to adhere to formal practices which have evolved out of the classic rules of composition and montage, but many video advertising products (including those epic scale commercials, music videos) frequently indulge in the anarchy of postmodernist excess. Accounting for recent stylistic alternatives in imaging and editing is not easily done, especially when concrete and pragmatic guidance needs to be proffered and applied in production critiques. It is difficult to advocate conformity to conventional production styles and practices when it becomes necessary to contend with trendy alternatives, and a maddening task to formulate an objective critique of work that superficially appears to be violating hallowed rules only out of radical spite.

Professionals often do not or cannot objectify their responses to the unconventional at a level any more articulate than "that's cool". The pressure to turn out product on time precludes much in the way of reflection on the why of what is done. Scenarios wherein seasoned and attuned *creatives* brainstorm and construct truly new and revolutionary approaches to communicative acts are far rarer than most outsiders are led to believe. The pressure to produce products assures thoughtless imitation and replication. As Lynch observed of the early development of the music

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video industry, "they borrow the techniques of Dada, Surrealism and abstract film." and as Dieckmann concurs, the "commercialized industry takes up avant-garde practices to sell products." While a professional might be comfortable with only an intuitive recognition of what works and what doesn't, those who are obliged to discuss, demonstrate, and evaluate media production practices are burdened with the need and responsibility to define and even quantify such practices. How does one critique the use of such imaging variables as black and white, gain boosted CCD grain, and Steadicam versus "shakycam"? What does shakycam signify?

The term shakycam is only by informal professional consensus the most apt, and this camera handling technique has also been referred to as "the film school look", and "watering the lawn". Compared with the conventional appearance of a smoothly moving dolly, tripod, or Steadicam stabilized camera, the shakycam image appears erratic and unplanned, the antithesis of well crafted and well directed. Shakycam can suggest a variety of implied situational and affective states; spontaneity, naïveté, confusion, improvisation, instability, even chaos. In contrast with the implied situational/affective states of professional control of production variables, shakycam might suggest a greater innocence of process.

Distinguishing good and appropriate shakycam from bad or inappropriate shakycam requires discerning some form of positive and constructive communication æsthetic within that which appears to be

random or thoughtlessly anarchic. It would be irresponsibly dismissive to simply forbid the use of shakycam as long as it remains a prominent technique in many highly sophisticated television applications. By the same token, it is not acceptable to counsel the imitation of a technique applied without regard to its purpose, affect, and intent. It is necessary, then, to attempt to define what is "authentic" or natural shakycam and what is not.

Natural body movement

As suggested by its alternative name, the "film school look" might result from a neophyte camera user's lack of bodily motor control and skill in obtaining a desired image composition. The image shakes and drifts because the camera user is unable to isolate body movement from the camera. The "film school look" is certainly not the best of terms to use, since similar image disturbances can occur at the hands of a professional in a tumultuous situation, as in the case of news footage shot during an unpredictable event. In both situations, the image is frequently destabilized due to body movements being transmitted directly through to the camera.

This factor will induce only certain movements, and not others. Since the body has specific points of pivot and leverage, the "authenticity" of camera shake will correspond to moves that the body in motion will produce. Bad shakycam would, therefore, exhibit movement that is entirely arbitrary and truly random, perhaps the loose movements of a camera on an

unlocked mount. The naturalness of axial movements becomes one possible component for evaluation.

Recomposition under stress

A second destabilizing factor relates to the search for the satisfactorily captured subject, the well-framed shot. Due to indecisiveness or interference, the desired framing of a subject may be acquired, lost, sought out and acquired again, lost again, and so forth. As the center of attention changes, so too may the framing of the shot be changed, and not always with perfect anticipation on the part of the camera operator. Still, there would be a pattern of acquisition and loss, reflecting the intent and deliberateness of the capturing/compositional process and the intelligence behind it.

An experienced camera user will inevitably develop a sense of composition in accordance with such established guidelines as the rule of thirds and balancing mass. These rules guide the establishment of a frame in which the subject or subjects are arranged in a conventionally pleasing manner, and in which the viewer may look about with some degree of free choice. Many compositional rules are intended to lead the viewer's gaze about within the established frame purposefully. But in the hands of the naïve user, the camera is often aimed like a rifle scope with the subject fixed dead-center like a hapless hare. Should the naïve user's interest be scattered over a number of subjects within the scene being captured, the

camera will often be moved from one center of attention to another, following much the same pattern that the user might trace with his or her eyes if observing the scene directly. But can there be authenticity and artifice in this apparently random flitting from one momentary visual fancy to another? Indeed, eyes move with purpose, and movement that does not track naturally shifting points of significance (visual elements, intrusive sound sources, and movement) could be considered fraudulent and unreal.

Camera movement as eye movement

How eyes are moved during the activity of seeing is a highly studied phenomenon. Eye movement recording systems have been used to analyze the pathways and stopping points subjects produce while attending to printed pages and television commercials. In advertising research, this has provided evidence of where a viewer's attention is drawn and in what manner attention shifts (Dorfman). While multiple measures have supported the hypothesis that "specific eye movements are indicative of specific sensory components in thought" (Buckner, Meara, Reese), this line of investigation has been somewhat too indirect for most professional media applications, and eye movement research has most commonly been directed towards the mapping of perceptual/cognitive neural pathways.

One thing eye movement recordings demonstrate clearly is that the eye moves almost constantly. It moves both deliberately, as when a page is read, and without deliberation in saccades (refreshing retinal sensitivity).

The narrow angle of full visual acuity also makes constant eye movement necessary. When a reader fixes their eye on the first word of a paragraph, they will be able to see but not discern other words only four or five lines away from the first. What "authentic" shakycam might exhibit is a camera movement that mimics eye movement. The accuracy of camera-as-eye movement becomes a third characteristic to consider in evaluation.

Camera-as-eye movement will appear more intense in effect than eye movement because the eye moves within a very wide field of vision covering approximately 180 degrees. The camera on the other hand drags with it a framed field of view that may cover only about 10 to 25 degrees, a very narrow window. In addition, this camera motion is situated within but is not synchronized with the eye's 180 degree angle of view.

What does shakycam mean?

From this evaluative approach to the authenticity of shakycam movement, there is not much to be concluded concerning shakycam meaning. Camera-as-eye movement may act as a perceptual component through prior association with memory images or culturally transmitted and valued experience. In other words, signification formed by cultural consensus may be as communicatively powerful as any inherently physiological sensory response to motion. However, it is worth recognizing the value of coordinating both of these signifying influences.

One of the first television commercials to apply shakycam presented a high level corporate meeting in which a desperately sweating executive was being chastised mercilessly for contracting out the company's telephone system to the "wrong long distance phone company". The disruptive camerawork was effectively in harmony with the fear and chaos of the executive's corporate crucifixion, providing what is sometimes termed a "stress perspective". Other television commercials have used shakycam to suggest the intimacies of home video, and the radical chic of shakycam has contributed much to fashion products that are, after all, only pants and hats and shoes. And where would music video be without it? But in the rush to be on "the edge", breakfast cereals and laxatives have also imitated this technique, and without the slightest thematic or emotional congruence between the technique's cognitive/cultural significations and the intended message. Reflexivity can be pleasing to observe, and directing attention towards the camera-recording process by placing it in the foreground may manufacture a beneficial appearance of candor on the part of the message-maker, but the meanings of such methods are inconsistent and ambiguous.

From a production æsthetics standpoint then, it is possible to distinguish between good and bad shakycam and other reflexive techniques. A consideration of the fundamental characteristics of perceptual and cognitive processes can provide substantial support for understanding how these techniques function.

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